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Vanishing (Reformed) Youth

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Vanishing (Reformed) Youth

Abstract

"The Pew Research Center released some of the first data from its 2014 research on the religious affiliations of the populace of the United States. With the comparisons made to a similar 2007 study, there are a lot of interesting tidbits floating in the data, but there are also some concerning trends"

Posting about doing a better job instilling a vibrant faithfulness in our children from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-vanishing-reformed-youth/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

The Vanishing (Reformed) Youth

 allinthings.org/the-vanishing-reformed-youth/

Donald Roth

Today, the Pew Research Center released some of the [first data](#) from its 2014 research on the religious affiliations of the populace of the United States. With the comparisons made to a similar 2007 study, there are a lot of interesting tidbits floating in the data, but there are also some concerning trends. Reformed folks may find one statistic particularly troubling: Pew's data shows that only [34% of Americans raised in a Reformed church will continue to attend one as adults](#). That puts us near the bottom of the pack among Protestants, and even religions generally.

It may be easy to respond to these numbers by dismissing them. Since the Reformed make up a small number of the U.S. population, these statistics may well be subject to the tyranny of small data sets. Similarly, we could locate the problem among whatever other Reformed denomination or churches we happen to dislike, saying it's really *their* problem, not *ours*. However, I would urge all of us, whether Reformed or not, to take this report as a rallying call not just to understand our own faith but to renew our commitment to cultivating a faithful vibrancy in our children as well.

The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly

To parse out why I interpret the report in this way, it's important to look at the 34% statistic in context with some of the others that the study gives about Reformed folks. The relatively good news is that the Reformed population has [remained stable](#) over the past seven years. While the Pew research shows a large number of youth leaving Reformed churches, a similar number of new people are coming in. At the same time, most of those who leave Reformed churches are not abandoning the faith entirely, as [42% end up in other protestant churches and 4% join the Catholic Church](#). The really ugly statistic though is that 20% are leaving the faith entirely, with 18% becoming totally religiously unaffiliated.

So what do these other numbers mean? Well, the good news is that it suggests that Reformed churches are not failing at their work of evangelism. Those who've left the tradition as they grew up have been replaced by new folks attracted to the theological richness and depth that the Reformed tradition has to offer. At the same time, it seems that the message that is enticing to others is missing many of the youth who grew up in Reformed churches. Losing one in five children from the faith entirely is a deep tragedy, and while we're not alone in that problem (our Presbyterian cousins lose one in four), the result is not foregone: for instance, the Anabaptists only lose 5-8% of their number to unbelief.

It seems clear then that we need to do something that better communicates the same message to our children that other Christians are finding inviting later in life.

Keeping the Faith: A Reading List

While I can't offer some twelve-step plan to solve for all our problems, the data Pew released isn't totally without precedent. We've heard some of these same cautions before, and my preparation for the regular conversation we have on this topic in Dordt's core capstone class has led me to some authors with great insights into this issue. What follows are a few of those gleaned insights and resources for where to go to dig into these issues further:

1. Our Faith Must be a Way of Life. In her book [Almost Christian](#), Kenda Creasy Dean reviews her work with the [National Survey of Youth and Religion](#), which found the predominant religion among American

teens to be a watered-down legalism that's been called moralistic therapeutic deism. In this book, Dean also looks at the teens who have maintained a vibrant, articulate faith, and for these teens "religion is not simply a matter of general identity or affiliation or cognitive belief. Faith for these teenagers is also activated, practiced, and formed through specific religious and spiritual practices," particularly those practices that reflect "an ethic of self-giving that reflects Christian views on the nature of God."¹

2. Life is Worship, and Worship is Formative. James K.A. Smith argues that our lives are defined by liturgy.² For him, liturgy is how habitual practices can powerfully shape our beliefs and identities. Our habits speak strongly to what we love, and our habitual practices orient us ever more to those loves.³ Smith calls these liturgies "embodied repetition" and his [Discipleship in the Present Tense](#) makes a powerful case for Christians not to flee or devalue religious ritual (such as Sabbath observance or regular communion) when we embrace it in so many other parts of our lives.

3. Our Worship is About Inviting In... In *The Bible Makes Sense*, Walter Brueggemann describes the Bible as "covenantal history. It speaks of a peculiar memory and promise, a very particular identity and vocation."⁴ Our task as Christians then is to nurture what he calls a "Historical Imagination," which is to "share in [the Bible's] perception and nuances so that our life-world conforms to what is central to the Bible."⁵ In other words, the goal of our worship, just as with our devotions, is to seek to enter and welcome each other into a covenant identity and embodied life outside of ourselves, outside of our comfort zones, but rooted in Zion.

4....Not Dumbing Down. Often, our response to shrinking numbers, particularly among the youth, is to reach out and try to tailor our practice more and more to what we perceive that group to want. However, as Thomas Bergler argues persuasively in [The Juvenalization of American Christianity](#), this often results in dividing the youth away from the rest of the body and teaching them to seek after church that's more like youth group. Bergler argues that these programs should be a vital support for, rather than an impediment to, the robust intergenerational life of the church. Our goal then, is to welcome the youth into the worship life of the whole church, cultivating an embodied faith that is tied in rather than parallel to the rest of the congregation.

5. We Should Have an Ecumenical Spirit but a Confessional Practice. One thing that may have struck you from much of the above is that it will necessarily be rather particularized. A common theme of many of the authors I've mentioned is the vital and central role that a local church should play in our spiritual formation, as well as that of our children. We may worry then that this would just increase a schismatic tribalism that works to divide rather than invigorate our churches. Ross Douthat has an encouragement, however, in his excellent book, *Bad Religion*. In referring to popular pastor Tim Keller, he says "while Keller is ecumenical in public dialogue, he is proudly confessional in worship and communion."⁶ Ultimately, Douthat urges us to be in a friendly dialogue with one another, but that "a conversation has to reach conclusions in order to actually stand for something; a community has to define itself theologically in order to be able to sustain itself across the generations."⁷

Again, I can't claim that these ideas are a panacea, but they may be a start. Perhaps your church already embodies these ideas, maybe without having named them as such. What would it look like for us to pursue them in practical terms? What other ideas should we be mindful of? How can we renew our efforts to instill a vibrant faithfulness in our children?

Footnotes

1. Kenda Creasy Dean, [Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church](#) (Oxford 2010) p. 69-70. [↩](#)
2. See his books [Desiring the Kingdom](#) and [Imagining the Kingdom](#) for more on this. [↩](#)
3. Some great examples of this include habitual practices around watching sports, but it can also include seemingly neutral things like shopping at the mall or even the grocery store. For more on this, see [Desiring the Kingdom](#) chapter 3. [↩](#)
4. Walter Brueggemann, [The Bible Makes Sense](#) (St. Anthony Messenger Press 2003) p. 25. [↩](#)
5. Id. [↩](#)
6. Ross Douthat, [Bad Religion](#) (Free Press 2012) p. 288. [↩](#)
7. Id. at 287. [↩](#)